THE MINISTER OF COMMERCE (SHRI RAMAKRISHNA HEGDE): (a) Yes, Sir.

(b) Yes, Sir. Requests have been received from the State Governments of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka for the removal of ban on export of onions. Representations were also received from farmers' associations and traders.

(c) The Government has permitted partial lifting of ban on export of Bangalore Rose Onion, small quantities of Krishnapuram onion, and has allowed export of 3000 MTs of all varieties of onion to Sri Lanka through N.A.F.E.D. Permission has also been granted for the export of 25,000 MTs. of onions per month for next three months through an agency to be designated by the Government of Maharashtra or by the Associate Shippers registered with the designated agency. While deciding to lift the ban partially, the Government has kept in view the interest of consumers also.

Tea Auction Centre at Guwahati

649. SHRI KARNENDU BHATTACHARJEE: Will the Minister of COMMERCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that there is no Tea Auction Centre at Guwahati; and

(b) if so, whether Government plan to set up one Tea Auction Centre at Guwahati in view of great demand from Tea Industry for quite a long time?

THE MINISTER OF COMMERCE (SHRI RAMAKRISHNA HEGDE): (a) No, Sir. A Tea Auction Centre has been functioning at Guwahati since September, 1970.

(b) Does not arise.

Tea Research Sub-Centre at Taklai

650. SHRI KARNENDU BHATTACHARJEE: Will the Minister of COMMERCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government have any plan to set up a sub-centre at Taklai at Silchar in Cachar District of Assam to monitor the work/progress in that area where there are more than 100 Tea Gardens, since there is a Tea Research Centre already working in Cachar District; and

(b) if so, the details thereof with probable time schedule by which the proposal will materialise?

THE MINISTER OF COMMERCE (SHRI RAMAKRISHNA HEGDE): (a) and (b) The Toklai Tea Experimental Station is run by the Tea Research Association which is a private body registered under the Societies Act. The TRA has already established an upgraded sub-centre with soil analytical lab at Cachar. Scientific support is provided to this sub centre by the base lab of TRA at Jorhat. The Government has therefore no separate proposal to open a sub-centre at Silchar, Cachar.

Free Trade Agreement with Sri Lahka

651. MISS SAROJ KHAPARDE: Will the Minister of COMMERCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government have entered into free trade agreement on long term basis with the Government of Sri Lanka;

(b) if so, what are the details in this regard;

(c) in which spheres and to what quantum it would accelerate the trade between the two countries;

(d) whether Government propose to enter into such a free trade agreements with other SAARC countries; and

(e) if so, by when, and if not, the reasons therefor?

THE MINISTER OF COMMERCE (SHRI RAMAKRISHNA HEGDE): (a) and (b) Yes, Sir. A Free Trade Agreement was signed on 28th December, 1998. The Agreement shall enter into force 30 days after the Contracting Parties have notified to each other regarding the completion of their respective constitutional requirements.

The Agreement envisages the phasing out of tariffs on all products except for a limited number of items in the Negative List over a period of time. While India would complete the process of tariff elimination over a period of 3 years, Sri Lanka would achieve this over a period of 8 years.

(c) to (e) To strengthen economic ties amongst SAARC countries an offer was made to all the SAARC member countries during the Colombo Summit that India would be willing to enter into bilateral Free Trade Agreements with them to accelerate the pace of trade liberalization in the region. This trade agreement with Sri Lanka will accelerate the development of national economies, promote mutually beneficial bilateral trade and strengthen intra-regional economic cooperation. The economic integration of the domestic market will accelerate the process of economic development and would also contribute to the expansion of world trade as well as establishment of SAARC Free Trade Area. Separate treaties of trade already exists between India and its two neighbours, Bhutan and Nepal which provide for liberal trade ties in accordance with our relations with them.

Suspension of Import of Rubber

652. SHRI JIBON ROY: Will the Minister of COMMERCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether the Rubber Board has recommended suspension of import of rubber to overcome the difficulties faced by the rubber plantation industry in India;

(b) whether the production of rubber showed decline due to import of rubber; and

(c) the steps taken by Government to save the rubber plantation industry in India?

THE MINISTER OF COMMERCE (SHRI RAMAKRISHNA HEGDE): (a) Yes, Sir.

(b) No, Sir.

(c) For the growth of rubber plantation industry, the Government of India through Rubber Board, has been providing extension and advisory support to the rubber growers, promoting processing and marketing of small growers' rubber through cooperative institutions and Rubber producers Societies, periodically revising the Benchmark Price" of Natural Rubber etc. Rubber Board also provides planting grant to Rubber Growers the, rate of which has been enhanced from Rs. 8,000/-ber ha. To Rs. 18,000/- and Rs. 22,000/- per ha. In traditional and non traditional areas respectively. '

In order to provide remunerative price of rubber to the rubber growers, the Government of India has been procuring rubber through STC at Government cost and selling the same to Advance Licence Holders. Further import of rubber through Advance Licence has also been suspended with effect from 20.2.99.

Growth of Exports

653. SHRI P. PRABHAKAR REDDY: Will the Minister of COMMERCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that at a Press Conference held on the 11th November, 1998 he had expressed optimisum that Indian export trade would achieve the growth target of 15 per cent in the current financial year;

(b) if so, whether this target has been fulfilled during the period April, 1998 to January 1999;

(c) if so, the details thereof;